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ḥafīzahullāh



Tawbah
Repentance

‘Allāmah An-Nawawī رحمته, in his epic collection of aḥādīth, Riyāḍ-aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn, states, “*Tawbah (repentance) is wājib (incumbent) from every sin.*” He makes this statement based on the verses of the Glorious Qur’ān, the aḥādīth of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم and the consensus of the Ummah.

Tawbah literally means to return; and the reason for repentance being given this name is that man’s original condition is to be free from sin and the disobedience of Allāh عز وجل, and he is expected to continually be in this state. So, when he happens to sin, by repenting he returns to that original state.

As Muslims, we believe that only the Ambiyā عليهم السلام were immune from sins and infallible. The rest of mankind are vulnerable and prone to sin. The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has said, “*All children of Ādam are sinners; and the best of the sinners are those who repent.*” (At-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah)

Regarding the ability to refrain from sins, we are all created equal; however, some may err more than others. Those who possess the highest degree of taqwā will sin very rarely, whilst those with less taqwā will sin much more frequently. The Awliyā, the special friends of Allāh عز وجل, whose hearts are infused with the nūr of taqwā seldom make mistakes. The higher the status of the walī, the less mistakes he will

make. And the special quality of the Awliyā is that as soon as they make a mistake, they immediately repent and seek forgiveness from Allāh ﷻ.

From amongst those who make mistakes there are two distinct groups. Firstly, those who after sinning don't give it a second thought. There is no feeling of guilt or remorse whatsoever. They are not perturbed by the fact that they have sinned. Such people never repent as they have no regret over what they have done.

The second group are those people who, if they commit a sin, repent immediately. They cannot rest until they have mended their relationship with Allāh ﷻ. The Prophet ﷺ described both groups in a ḥadīth wherein he says, *“The believer sees his sins as if he was sitting under a mountain and he fears it may fall upon him; whereas, a wicked person sees his sins like a fly around his nose which he swats away.”* (Al-Bukhārī)

Similarly, regarding the second group, Allāh ﷻ says:

“And those who, when they happen to commit a shameful act or wrong themselves, remember Allāh, then seek forgiveness for their sins and do not persist in what they have done, knowingly; and who is there to forgive sins except Allāh?” (3:135)

The pious are those who fear that if they were to stay

in the state of sin, their hearts will become engulfed in darkness and then void of guidance. This is mentioned in a ḥadīth in which the Prophet ﷺ says that whenever a person sins, a black dot appears on his heart, if he does not repent then this black spot remains on his heart. Then, if he is to commit another sin, another black dot appears and so on, until his whole heart becomes such that it will not accept guidance. (At-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah) Allāh ﷻ makes mention of this in the Qur’ān when He says:

“No! But that which they used to commit has covered their hearts with rust.” (83:14)

Therefore, if we happen to sin, we should repent immediately, following the example of the pious as quoted in the verse above. It should not be the case that we wait for Ramaḍān or any other blessed time, or until we visit a blessed place like Makkah, Al-Madīnah or even the masjid; rather, we should repent immediately as by doing so we will earn the great rewards promised by Allāh ﷻ for repenting to Him:

“Their reward is forgiveness from their Lord and gardens beneath which rivers flow where they shall live forever. And excellent is the reward of those who work.” (3:136)

This opportunity to repent is available to us until we reach the last stages of our lives when we begin to witness the scenes of the Hereafter. After this, no repentance will be accepted from anyone. Therefore, as we do not know when

this moment will come for us, we should repent immediately upon making a mistake.

Benefits of Tawbah

- A person who, after sinning, does tawbah, becomes the beloved of Allāh ﷻ.

“...Surely Allāh loves those who are most repenting...”
(2:222)

- The one who repents becomes clean and pure from sins. In a ḥadīth the Prophet ﷺ has said, *“The one who repents from sins is like the one who has no sins.”* (Ibn Mājah, Al-Bayhaqī)

Subḥānallāh! The Mercy of Allāh ﷻ is such that when a person truly repents to Allāh ﷻ then all his past sins are erased. From other aḥādīth we learn that not only are the sins erased from his account, but Allāh ﷻ will also cause the Angels who write his deeds to forget that the sin was ever committed. Similarly, even the piece of earth and the objects that witnessed him commit the sin, will also be made to forget. (Kanz-al-‘Ummāl, Al-Jami‘ Aṣ-Ṣaghīr)

- If a person repents sincerely from sin and then does good actions, inshā’allāh, his bad deeds will be transformed into good deeds.

“...except the one who repents and believes and

does good deeds, then Allāh will replace the evils of such people by good deeds, and Allāh is Most-Forgiving, Very-Merciful.” (25:70)

- Another benefit is that through repentance the soul is nourished; it becomes healthy, and in turn it becomes easier for it to stay away from sins. The similitude is that of a person who wishes to run 10 kilometres. Initially, because he is unfit he cannot do so. However, if he slowly builds up his stamina, a time will come when he will be able to do so easily. Similarly, although at the beginning a person won't be able to refrain from sinning despite trying, but if and when he does falter, he continually repents sincerely, then inshā'allāh a time will come when he will be able to refrain from sins.

Difference between Tawbah and Istighfār

Two commonly used terms are *tawbah* and *istighfār*. However, they are often misunderstood and even used in place of one another. Tawbah means to repent to Allāh ﷻ, whilst istighfār is to ask for forgiveness from Allāh ﷻ. Therefore, it can be said that istighfār is part of tawbah, as repenting will include seeking forgiveness. But istighfār in itself will not be enough for repentance to be accepted unless Allāh ﷻ wishes. In order for tawbah to be complete the following conditions must be met:

1. There should be a feeling of remorse and regret over the

sin committed.

2. There should be complete disassociation from the sin that was being committed.
3. A firm resolve should be made not to commit the sin again.
4. Sometimes, there is also a 4th condition - that together with the above conditions a person has to make up for the wrong he committed. For example, if he had been missing ṣālah then he will have to perform the qaḍā for these. Similar would be the case with ṣawm, zakāh, etc. If the sin was connected to the violation of the rights of another person, such as stealing, swearing, etc. then he must make good whatever he violated from the person or seek explicit forgiveness.

Maintaining Hope

We should never become despondent from repenting and mending our relationship with Allāh ﷻ. Often, after repenting to Allāh ﷻ a few times, we begin to think that it is of no use to repent as we will falter again. This is an incorrect mindset. Remember, when we repent all our sins are forgiven and all Shayṭān's work goes to waste, yet despite knowing this Shayṭān never stops trying to make us commit sins. Furthermore, there is a stark contrast in the two efforts made by us in trying to refrain from sin and that made by Shayṭān in attempting to make us sin. If

we make a mistake and falter, all we need to do is repent sincerely and our sin will be forgiven. And it is not the case that when we happen to sin again all the sins come back that we had previously repented from - no! Once we repent sincerely those sins are banished from our account never to return. Therefore, when we repent we have absolutely nothing to lose; whilst Shayṭān knows when trying to make us sin that we can very easily repent and make all his efforts go to waste. Yet this does not stop Shayṭān making effort, so why should we become despondent of repenting to Allāh ﷻ?

A lesson from the aḥādīth, in order to teach us not to become despondent and continue to mend our relationship with Allāh ﷻ whenever we falter, is that the Prophet ﷺ would turn to Allāh ﷻ in repentance, according to one ḥadīth 70 times (Al-Bukhārī), and according to another 100 times a day. (Muslim)

May Allāh ﷻ allow us to understand the reality of tawbah and continually mend our relationship with Him, and make us from His Awliyā who seldom sin.

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